

Phillip George is a surfer. He surfs at Maroubra Beach almost every day. He knows the southern Sydney beaches and coastline intimately and metaphysically. Like any good surfer he studies the turbulent movements of the swell as it collides with the ancient weathered sandstone rock formations, cliffs and beaches. A good ride is dependent on his knowledge of this divide, and Phillip George successfully rides many waves.

In his essay on George's 'Little Bay' series, cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis suggests that 'Coastal life represented the ideal in the Australian imaginary, it was where social differences seemed to matter least, or at least one was lead to believe that they could be temporarily left behind. Where the land met the water, the tensions between past and present, being and becoming could be suspended.'

However, the idyllic notion of the beach being the great social equalizer has now been shattered, and the beach can never be the same innocent site of pleasure as Phillip George is all too aware that Maroubra Beach which is north of the now infamous Cronulla Beach is not innocent nor culturally neutral, as both beaches were epicentres of recent violent race riots, where 'locals' refused anyone of 'middle eastern appearance' from enjoying the cooling sensations of the beach as a respite to the burning heat of the Australian summer. This geographic intersection where the water meets the land, for George, has always been a complex 'border-land', a site of entry and a transaction of the process's of colonisation from the very moment when the 1<sup>st</sup> fleet entered Botany Bay. For George the coast, in this context, is more than a geographic actuality. For in reality it represents a line of division, where entry and departure is monitored, under constant surveillance, as it functions as a means of exclusion and national identity. It is not fluid and despite appearances is not porous, nor open nor free, but its geography is defined politically in terms of nation, and as a measure of the limits of sovereignty. This borderland is the beach itself. Yet it is in this borderland Philip George continues to focus his critical and creative energy, extending on the cultural interventions resonant in his previous computer generated photographic TRANZLUTIONS works, where he reinscribed both the Aboriginal and colonial condition of the Little Bay coastline, multiplying it with the new memories, cultural iconographies and histories of Greek diaspora, as a means of invoking plausible parallel illusions into the Australian imaginary. His encounter with the coastline is mediated with a desire for engagement and dialogue, and with the transformative capacity of difference when it is balanced and acknowledged in relation to cultural inclusivity, respect ethics and integrity as opposed to the divisiveness and violent animosity of cultural confrontations of Cronulla.

*Borderlands*, is a metaphysical wondrous and transformative experience, infused with a politically mediated encounter between east and west. It is a photo mediated installation that calculatedly blurs the distinctions between photography, installation, representation and digital technologies, that both tactically and strategically critique the technical borders that separate disciplines as a means of attacking the borders that divide cultures and maintain what seems like a permanent state of cultural confrontation, crisis and anxiety.

For George, the surfboard and surfing culture is iconically Australian, identifiably Australian in character as it represents a self perception of freedom albeit an illusion, of a happy go lucky culture free of constraints, independent and transcending of political economic rationalisms. Riding the wave transcends both time and space, and for that moment, the surfer can stand outside of time and experience an appreciation of the infinite. As George suggests surfing is both transformative in its potential and meditative in its spiritual possibilities. And it is in this precise context that we begin to understand George's continual negotiation of east and west in

relation to the local implications of global conflict, distilled and critically evaluated through surfing metaphors, in a tactical border crossing between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the known local and the foreign other stranger, and between the secular and the fear of Islam (and its generalised homogenised misrepresentation of the Arab).

In his installation, *Borderlands*, Phillip George has transformed 30 surfboards into sacred objects of veneration. The surfboards are familiar as their shapes are recognisable and everyday and could be found easily at either Maroubra or Cronulla. The fibreglass surfboards are seven foot, and stand vertically slightly taller, towering above the viewer in their minimal support frames. They occupy the space in a modernist grid, evenly spaced – ordered like a forest of totemic signs but facing east towards Mecca. Their presence is felt immediately upon entering the cavernous industrial almost bauhausian space of the Turbine Gallery at Casula Powerhouse. The viewer experiences a feeling of spaciality, that is not unlike the experience of crossing the threshold as you enter a mosque. Daunted by the mesmerising scale of the architectural space of a mosque, you never see the detail immediately as you are overwhelmed by the complex patina of the overall design. You're unsure of where to look and how to look until you experience the time to focus, in stillness on the detail. It is then that you succumb to its transcending potential. It is then that you understand the breathtaking consequences beauty and serenity in the calming spiritual tranquility of the mosque.

Likewise as you focus on the intricate expression of beauty on the decks and bottoms of the surfboards themselves, it is then that you begin to realise the significance of George's *Borderlands* Project. The surfboards have been reinscribed with iconography from the historic mosques that Phillip George has photo documented from his many sojourns to the Middle East, travelling to Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria and Iraq. The images are details of the internal wall mosques, entrance ways and threshold – exquisite in their design, colour and patina of age and historical and spiritual significance. They reflect repeating motifs of 'the tree of life' and 'the Garden of Eden' in their many manifestations from Egypt to Persia, extending through to Ottoman Turkey. The Arabic forms are more pure in their mathematical abstractions as their geometries express the idea of God in the infinite and the indescribable beyond human comprehension. By remapping the surfboards, George envelops the western idea of the surfboard, investing it with a different meaning and a different history, derived from Islam and Arabic culture. In doing so he collapses what are conceivably polar opposites into a space of dialogue and exchange – a space that generates ideas of communion between the two cultures. Although wholly familiar with the significations deployed by both subjects, George's hybrid of cultural forms is concerned with what Homi Bhabha refers as 'reinscribing or translating and transvaluing of cultural difference in the third space of enunciation'. Bhabha goes on to suggest that 'cultural difference must not be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogenous empty time of national community, ... the analysis of cultural difference intervenes to transform the site of articulation' with the aim of rearticulating the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization whilst producing other spaces of subaltern signification. It is in these new spaces of articulating differences that George's *Borderlands* project begins to imagine the shared space of dialogue that resists the violence of confrontation. It is in such intersecting spaces that cultures be transformed on the basis that we can experience the real and material exchange of difference, of interests and better value and appreciate the contribution of knowledge of the Islamic and Arabic worlds.

Phillip George utilises surfing culture, spiritualism and beauty as a form of political agency in appealing to the principle of dialogue as a means constructing change towards a different future. Clearly the processes and politics of confrontation in dealing with the Middle East at both a global and local level have not worked, will not work and do not work.

Congratulations to Dr Phillip George for producing a provocative and stimulating exhibition. To Dr David McNeill for his critical contributions to this exceptional catalogue. I would also like to thank Mark Rabbidge for his extraordinary work in producing these spectacular surfboards and former world surfing champion Pam Burridge for officially launching this exhibition. This exhibition would not have been possible without the support of Casula Powerhouse staff, in particular Brianna Munting, Georgia Connolly, Iakovos Amperidis, Paul Greedy, Lilian Yong, Vaughan O'Connor, Ivana Pepic, Angela Lemme & Claire Hargreave. We thank Liverpool City Council, the NSW Government through Arts NSW, the Federal Government through the Australia Council for the Arts for their continued and generous support.